

Squandering 'green' opportunities

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

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ON the eve of the G20 London Summit last week, two significant international meetings related to education took place back-to-back in Europe.

One was the Commonwealth Educational Cooperation at the University of Oxford; the other was the UNESCO World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development in Bonn.

Fittingly, the former celebrates the first Commonwealth Education Conference held in Oxford some 50 years ago. Indeed, the Commonwealth is often said to rest on the three pillars of language, law and education, each reflecting one another.

The year 1959 has been generally regarded as the start of the modern era of cooperation in education where much has been achieved to further promote development.

It was in 1959, too, that the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan was launched, benefiting about 25,000 people thus far.



And at the 2009 Oxford Conference, it was a time to reflect on what had been achieved since 1959 in educational cooperation across the Commonwealth.

More than 120 participants from many Commonwealth countries, including Malaysia, were present at the three-day meeting to discuss issues relating to the future of education in all dimensions.

Very importantly, the discussion will help focus and pave the way for the 17th Commonwealth Conference of Education Ministers as well as the Vice-Chancellors' Forum to be held in June in Kuala Lumpur.

The Bonn meeting, on the other hand, focused more on the issue of sustainable development.

Nevertheless, it was also a time to reflect on the achievements since the launch of the United Nations Decade on Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) in 2005.

It is apt that an assessment is conducted this year on the decade. The meeting was attended by more than 700 participants from all over the world.

Both meetings were hailed as a success where richness of experience and knowledge were shared, apart from forming partnerships and networking to enhance capacity building.

The meeting recognises that the impact of education on the future is vital. More specifically, if it leads to unsustainable development, there will be many more drawbacks despite the unprecedented economic growth in the last century.

In fact, poverty and inequality persist, affecting even more people, particularly the most vulnerable, residing

largely in the developing world.

Unsustainable production and consumption patterns continue to leave large ecological footprints that compromise further global living standards.

That both conferences were held at a time when global economic and financial crises are unfolding highlights the risks of development being pursued in an "unsustainable" way.

It raises pertinent questions about the educational models and practices advocated even in the most prestigious, world-class universities.

Reportedly, the Harvard Business School was not spared criticism that it had not adequately prepared graduates to cope with the economic meltdown (*Financial Daily*, April 6).

Toxic chief executive officers like Stanley O'Neal, John Thain, Rick Wagoner and Chris Cox are all Harvard alumni who were implicated in somewhat tarnishing the "brand" and reputation of the school.

The last time the school overhauled its curriculum was just after the 2001 Enron Corp case of fraudulent accounting.

This time around, perhaps it is time to unravel more seriously the cliché: what they didn't teach at HBS!

Like it or not, education for sustainable development is the new direction for education in the 21st century.

It is based on strong values, ethics, principles and practices that can bring about a transformational change in the education sector.

At the same time, it addresses different priorities and issues that will give rise to a new and sustainable economy that will take us through the 21st century.

Indeed, the Bonn Declaration adopted at the end of the three-day conference noted that the first five years of the UNDESD has led to some progress.

Many are committed to Education for Sustainable Development goals at various levels though admittedly much still needs to be done, especially in tertiary level education.

Like the current economic thinking, there must also be new thinking in education.

Having said this, it is pathetic to note that 29-paragraph communiqué issued at the G20 London Summit made mention about a "green recovery" only in the second and third last paragraphs.

The language apparently was further weakened by the leaders squandering the opportunity to create what was trumped as "a global green new deal".

This is, of course, not surprising because such summits of world leaders are better known for their "hot air", regardless of how warm the globe is!

In other words, it is up to the leaders in the educational sectors to demand for a re-orientation of the education and training systems so as to address sustainability concerns through coherent policies at the national, local as well as institutional levels.

Failure is not an option, if the future generations are foremost in our minds.

* The writer is the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia. He can be contacted at vc@usm.my

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